Charlotte Mason's House of Education,
Scale How, Ambleside, UK, 2009

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Miss Mason's paper was illustrated by short papers by ex-students of the House of Education, as follow:—

Miss E. Armitage then read a paper on

FIRST READING LESSONS.

The subject which we are going to consider for a few minutes, namely, first reading lessons, is, I think, one, which for the sake of the children, is well worth our consideration. Reading lessons are usually regarded as dreary and wearisome opportunities, not indeed unmixed with sorrow, or there would be no necessity for books with such suggestive titles as "The Happy Reader," or "Reading without tears." Let us see wherein the mistake lies, for that there is some mistake to produce such a state of things is quite evident. To begin with, the prevalent idea is that the difficulty of a word depends upon the number of letters of which it is made up, and therefore the child is set to learn strings of meaningless syllables of two letters, "ba, be, bi, bo, bu, at, et, it, ot, ut, etc.," to teach him the sounds of the vowels, a dreary task indeed for a child, and of what use is it to him when accomplished? for in our language *numbers* of sounds are represented by a single vowel. Then, when he gets a little more advanced, he learns M A T mat, C A T cat, which by the way, if you come to think of it, is hardly true from a common-sense point of view, for C A T spells ceaty, and C'A'T' spells cat, does it not? The great mistake in such lessons is, that the child's imagination has no play at all, not a single living idea is presented to him, and how can they fail to be dull and irksome? But this need not be the case if we set to work with the understanding that it is not dry, bare facts which we wish to impart to the child, but that we want to present ideas to a mind and imagination ready and attentive to receive them.

But I feel that before considering so important a question as how the child is to be taught to read, we should first have some idea of what preparation he has already had. When a baby, he has his picture books, and amongst the rest, one with big, bright coloured letters, and an appropriate picture by each letter (and have you noticed that babies almost invariably love their A B C books better than any

others), and he soon, with very little help and encouragement, learns to connect the letters with the pictures, C for cat, M for monkey, etc. He also has his box of letters, and if he is at all inclined to be interested in them, even if he is only a baby, he can begin to pick out the ones he knows. He loves to play at finding his letters,—"Shew me the letter that stands for baby, etc.," and he does so with a look of real pride and pleasure on his face.

This, of course, should be entirely in the nature of a game; and he should never be teased, or made to find his letters for the sake of showing off, especially when his heart is set on other things. Neither is there any need to hurry him at this stage; if he learn one form at a time, so that he can pick out all the D's say, big and little, in a page of large print, his progress will at any rate be sure, and the ideas lasting. In naming his letters, let him use simply the *sounds* of the letters, thus D' for *d*uck, *d*-oll, *d*-og, etc.

But he should not only be able to recognise letters when he sees them, but must picture them for himself. Give him a tray of sand, in which, with his own finger, he can make the forms of the letters—an amusement which will afford him the greatest delight, for nothing pleases a child more than the feeling of power which he has when he can do something quite by himself. In this way too, not only will his power of observation be cultivated, but he will get his first ideas of making lines and curves.

Thus, in quite a short time, and with no real effort, the child has learnt his letters, *i.e.*, he now almost unconsciously connects the form of the letter with its sound, or with the idea of some real thing that he knows and that interests him.

At length the day arrives when this becomes so easy that it ceases to be amusing, but he may be considered too young yet for the necessary effort required in learning to read. He can now be introduced to the new and quite as delightful game of word making, which will teach the *power* of the letters with whose *forms* he has already grown familiar. Take two of his letters, and make the syllable "an." "That is the word we use when we say 'an orange,' 'an apple,' 'an egg.'" Put the different consonants before it (always being careful that each syllable he is shown is a word that he knows, and is therefore connected with some living idea in his mind.) Put C or R before it and ask, "Now what word is

it?" And having already learnt the *sounds* of his consonants, not their *names*, he will be able to answer "can, ran," etc. Then, "What letter would you put before 'an' to make 'man,' 'pan,' etc.," and he puts the letters himself.

He can go on doing the same with other syllables, "at," "it," and so in time he will learn to read off dozens of words of three letters, and will recognise them as old friends when he meets them in a line of print. The initial "th" should be treated as one letter, and also the final "ng," and let these be introduced into the words in the same way as the single consonants.

These word-making exercises form an excellent opportunity for cultivating clearness in pronunciation. Require him to pronounce the words he makes with such finish and distinctness that he can hear and realise the different sounds in them. It would be wearisome, both to child and parent, if he were constantly being pulled up in their daily intercourse on the score of pronunciation. But here is our opportunity. He must not consider that he really knows the written word until he pronounces it *perfectly*. In time this will influence his every-day speech, and he will not "clip" his words as children and even grown-up people so often do.

Accustom him from the first to shut his eyes and *see* the letters in the word he has made, and in this way he will learn to spell as well as to read, which is necessary, for a good reader is not always a good speller.

But *so* far, all we have considered is merely by way of preparation, and though he is able to recognise a good many short words when he sees them, he has not yet attempted to read at all.

But it is high time now that the child should set to work and really learn to read, and we must understand clearly what this is to involve.

If words were always made on a given pattern in English, if the same letters always represented the same sounds, learning to read would be a very easy matter; but this is far from being the case. Take, for example, the letter O, as we have it in "for," "to," "of," "word," "no," "round," etc., and it represents a different sound in each case; and surely it is not a suitable and appropriate task for a child to analyse these sounds as they occur in the different words. It would involve unnecessary labour for him if we based

the teaching of reading entirely on the sounds of the letters. Upon what then is this, as all other teaching, to be based? Let us remember that in all branches of education, *ideas* are the chief agent with which we have to work, and that these ideas must be sown in the child's mind, that there they may feed and grow and produce other ideas after their kind. Therefore, in reading, the child should be taught from the first to regard the printed word as he already regards the spoken word, as the symbol of a fact or idea full of interest to him. Thus, no matter what the length of the word, he will learn to recognise it, if it be connected in his mind with some living idea. No *steps* then are needed in learning to read, but he must start straight away with the words, and learn to recognise a word, "which" for instance, just as he recognises the letter B, because he has seen it before, been made to look at it with interest, and the pattern of it is stamped on his brain, in fact, it has become an idea in his mind. What definitely we propose, then, in teaching a child to read is:—

Firstly.—That he shall know at sight some thousand words. This will be accomplished in about five months if he learn ten words a day. Secondly.—That he shall be able to build up new words with the elements of those he already knows by sight. For the sake of clearness, let us take an example of a child's first reading lesson. He is prepared for it, and has been looking forward to it for days with the keenest interest, for is it not to be a day of great importance in his life?

We invite him to come with us to a room alone, bringing his box of loose letters, and we provide a box of cards, with a word of the lines he is going to learn written upon each card, also a note book, a book of big print, containing, besides other things, the lines he is going to read, and if possible we have a blackboard and chalk. To begin with, we must be careful to choose lines that will interest and amuse him, and appeal to his imagination—for example—

"The friendly cow all red and white
I love with all my heart,
She gives me cream with all her might
To eat with apple tart," etc.

The first *two* lines will be quite enough for the first lesson—

"The friendly cow all red and white
I love with all my heart."

We write C O W upon the board in large printed letters. The child watches with interest and picks out the letters, which are already old friends, from his box, and makes the word. We tell him that the word is "cow," and he looks at it with pleasure, because the written symbol is connected with some idea already existing in his mind; we might have a little talk about a cow while he has a good look at the word. Then give him a book of big print and let him find it out for himself in as many places as he can, by the end of which time he will know the look of it quite well. Let him see if he can spell it, or make it with his own letters quite alone, and he will probably be able to do so, but if not, do not insist upon his learning to spell it, he will at any rate be able to read it whenever he sees it, and very likely be able to spell it next time. Then let him have the pleasure of hunting in his box for the card with the word "cow" printed on it.

Now let us write L O V E on the board under "cow," and let him in the same way as before pick out the letters from his box and make it for himself. Then tell him that the word is "love," and surely the idea connected with it is a pleasant one to him, for is not a child's life full of love? The list of people and things whom he loves would be a very long one.

Treat this word in the same way; letting him first fix his attention upon it until he knows the look of it, and then find it out in the printed book, not only in one place, but wherever it appears; then let him make it again from memory if he can, and lastly pick it out from his box of cards.

And so on with "friendly," "red," "heart," etc., until he knows them all.

Now he has his list of words written upon the board, and also those like them which he has made with his own letters besides those on the printed cards. We let him read the list up and down, and say any word that we point to until he can do it quite easily. Then we group them

in different ways, and let him read them off. "The red and white cow," "I love the red cow," "My friendly heart," "All love the white cow," etc., being careful that each group of words makes sense. But we have purposely kept the actual lines quite a secret until the end, and now comes the most delightful part of the lesson, when he is to have the book and be shown the lines, and behold! he can actually read them quite alone. No stumbling and hesitation for he knows all the words; does not each one carry its own idea with it, and the sight of it at once brings a picture to his mind, with which it will always be connected. He can then arrange his printed cards in the right order.

In this short time, twenty minutes at most, he has indeed gained much knowledge, and he has a delicious sense of the power he has gained with it. Yes, he now knows at any rate eleven words, and will be able to read them whenever he meets them—and all in twenty minutes. Surely this is not such very slow progress! Perhaps some, indeed, are thinking that a child of average intelligence would not be able to manage so much, or that twenty minutes of continued effort would be too long. It is true, children differ very much as to the amount they are able to bear at a time, and their quickness of taking in new ideas, and this of course must be considered in the reading lesson. No lesson should be *longer* than twenty minutes, and most children would be able to learn the two lines in that time; but others might not, and must certainly not be urged to take in more than they can quite easily manage. One line, or even less, may be all that some children could learn at a time, to begin with at any rate, and the lessons could be lengthened according as they were able to bear it.

The next day, instead of the reading lesson which he has promised himself, he will have a spelling lesson which may be made quite as interesting. We write "cow" on the board, and let him read it: then rub it off and he makes it from memory with his letters. Say "*c*-ow" slowly, bringing out the initial letter—"What sound will be left if we take away the 'c,'" and with a little help he will find it is "ow." "But that is not a word—it doesn't mean anything, but see if you can make another word '*s*ow' from it" (again emphasising the first letter) and he adds 's,' for he already

knows the sounds of the consonants. And so on, until we have quite a list of words—"bow-wow, now, sow, how," etc., and have a little talk about each one, introducing them into sentences and making them, so to speak, living things in his mind.

Then take another word "red" and treat it in the same way, and we get "bed, fed, ned, led"; and here a difficulty may arise—he may suggest "head," in which case he must simply be told that we cannot add that to our list, because it is made up of different letters, though it sounds the same. There is no need to dwell upon this little difficulty at present, for he will constantly meet with it, and get used to the idea, that the same sound is not always represented by the same letters. Then take "all," let him add on the consonants to make "ball, tall, call, hall," etc., and make another column of these. Perhaps these three words will be enough to take for his first spelling lesson. Let him read the columns up and down and any way; every word has a meaning and carries an idea.

Then, by way of recapitulation at the end of the lesson, let us make sentences, introducing the new words he has made and, if he can, he may print them in his note-book. We dictate—"How I love my ball," "I call the red cow," etc. and he arranges them. Now, for a new experience. We dictate—"Ned led the white sow to her bed." Consternation! He does not know "to" nor "her." "Never mind, put counters for the words you don't know, they may soon come in our lessons"; and the child has a desire and a need, that is, an appetite for learning. If there is time, and he is not tired, we deal with the remaining words in the same way —from "love," we get "glove, dove, shove"; from "white," "kite, bite." He will be able to make new words much more easily now, after the practice he has had. He may make a list of his words in his note-book, and will feel his possessions are indeed great, when he sees how long it is; it will be a delight to him to see his list grow from day to day.

The next day he learns the two following lines, and then another spelling lesson, introducing more new words. By the time he gets to the end of the rhyme, he has quite a large stock of words and, besides, can readily make new ones from the old. He has gained experience and courage,

and feels that learning is a delight, for in these lessons his imagination is constantly being appealed to and he gains a fresh idea with every new word he learns. They also afford some moral training. No stumbling and hesitation are allowed from the first, for the ideas connected with the written symbols are vivid, and flash into his mind the instant his eye lights upon the words. There must be no dawdling through a lesson; but clear, bright attention is to be maintained, without which it is impossible for ideas to be awakened in the mind. And, lastly, perfection and finish must be aimed at in style and enunciation. However simple the lines may be, they should be read in the best possible way. The idea of reverence for his language should be presented to a child; point out the beauty in certain words, and that it is quite distressing to spoil this by imperfect pronunciation.

In conclusion, let me quote some words from Ruskin which, though they do not quite bear on these very early reading lessons, they yet set before us the ideal at which we must aim from the first.

"You must get into the habit of looking intensely at words, and assuring yourself of their meaning, syllable by syllable, nay, letter by letter"; and again, "The entire difference between education and non-education (as regards the merely intellectual part of it) consists in this accuracy. A well-educated gentleman may not know many languages, may not be able to speak any but his own, may have read very few books. But whatever language he knows, he knows precisely; whatever word he pronounces, he pronounces rightly; above all, he is learned in the *peerage* of words; knows the words of true descent and ancient blood, at a glance, from words of modern canaille."

MISS K. R. HAMMOND then read a paper on

PICTURE TALKS.

My object to-day is to give some account of one particular branch of the teaching of the *Parents' Review* School—of our Picture Talks, as they are descriptively called. We are justified in according them a place in our school programme, by our definition of education as "the science of relations." In these lessons we aim at putting the children in touch with